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DVDs / AROUND THE WORLD

Real comedy with the Tati touch

JEFF HEINRICH

Almost 30 years after his death, Jacques Tati is enjoying a bit of a renaissance as one of the greats of cinema comedy – even while his reputation off-screen takes a bit of a beating.

Tati is caricatured in Sylvain Chomet's Oscar-nominated animated feature L'Illusionniste, based on a script Tati co-wrote with Jean-Claude Carrière but never filmed. (See my review at montrealgazette.com/movies.)

Tati's own movies – three brilliant features, three lesser ones and an early short – have been restored, re-screened and reissued in special editions on DVD and Blu-ray.

But with the revival has come a whiff of controversy. The story was revealed in a biography published in 2008. During the Second World War in Paris, while struggling to make ends meet in nightclubs, Tati fathered a daughter out of wedlock. Not only did he abandon baby Helga and her mother (an Austrian refugee named Herta Schiel, who was a dancer at the Lido in Paris), but for the rest of his life Tati refused to acknowledge his paternity.

Helga would grow up to marry an Englishman and have three sons (one of whom bears a gangly resemblance to dad). Her name has come up again with the release of L'Illusionniste, since its story – about the relationship between an old magician named Tatischeff (Tati's birth name) and a young Scottish girl – has been taken to be a veiled ode to Tati's neglected daughter. If Chomet wins the Oscar on Feb. 27, will he do what Tati never did: give Helga her due, in public and for the record?

Watching Tati's movies on home video is a good way to prepare for what could be high drama on the Academy stage.

Start at the beginning with Tati's early short L'École des facteurs (School for Postmen, 1947) and his feature follow-up Jour de fête (The Big Day, 1949). In both, Tati plays a French mailman who gets up to all sorts of hilarious antics. Jour de fête hasn't been issued yet on DVD in North America, but can be ordered from England in a fine edition by the British Film Institute. L'École des facteurs, all 14 minutes of it, is available here as an extra on The Criterion Collection DVD of Tati's third feature, Mon oncle (My Uncle, 1958).

More on that in a moment, but first a word about Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot (Monsieur Hulot's Holiday, 1953). This second feature not only made Tati into an international star, it made his raincoat-wearing, pipe-smoking, bumbling Hulot character into one of the icons of movie comedy. With very little dialogue but marvellous attention to sound and sight gags, Tati manages to make a few days at the beach in August into an unforgettable adventure. The film got Tati his first Oscar nomination, for best original screenplay.

Pathetically, Les vacances also marked the first time little Helga saw her father "live." As revealed in Jean-Philippe Guérand's biography, she was 11 years old at the time, living at a boarding school in St. Germain des Prés, when, like many children, she was taken to see the hit comedy by Tati. Five years later, she would "meet" her dad again in Mon oncle. Helga was then 16 and employed as an au pair in Paris. Onscreen, her father, as the rumpled Hulot, is welcomed into the ultra-modern home of his idolizing nephew, Gérard, and the contrast between the old and the new fashions leads to gag after gag.

Did Helga find any of it funny? We don't know, but in 1958 the rest of the world did. Mon oncle won the Oscar and a New York Film Critics Circle Award that year for best foreign-language film, and also got a special prize at the Cannes Film Festival. By contrast, Tati's next picture, Play Time (1967), a masterpiece nine years in the making and so expensive it almost bankrupted its creator, was a flop. By the start of the 1970s, Tati was running out of steam, scraping together financing to make his last Hulot picture, Trafic (1971), which lampoons the world of automobiles. Tati finally bowed out in 1974 doing circus pratfalls on videotape for Swedish TV in his last film, Parade. He died in 1982, age 75.

On home video, Tati's cinematic legacy on this side of the ocean is mostly a Criterion affair. Besides the Mon oncle DVD, the premium U.S. label has a Blu-ray of Play Time, a fine DVD of Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot and a double-DVD set of Trafic (though unfortunately already out of print, copies of the latter can easily be found online). The British Film Institute has a crisp DVD of Parade. But the most loving attention anyone has given to Tati on disc is the appropriately named label Les Films de Mon Oncle, whose colourful cardboard-based, two-disc sets of Mon oncle and Play Time are works of art themselves; for online prices, go to drdpaschinznet.

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Jacques Tati, with Alain Becourt, in Mon oncle, which won an Oscar in 1958. It also won a New York Film Critics Circle Award and a special prize at the Cannes Film Festival.

FROM GAZETTE FILES

New DVDs on the shelves today

Monsters ★★★
It's Kind of a Funny Story ★★½
You Again ★★½
Life as We Know It ★★
Wild Target ★★★½
The Romantics ★★½
Thelma and Louise (Blu-ray) ★★★★

To read reviews of these DVDs, and to see a complete list of today's releases, visit montrealgazette.com/arts.

5 DVDs to be released next week

Hereafter
Waiting for "Superman"
You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger
Cat Low
Dr. Who: A Christmas Carol

★ Not if they paid you
★ Don't bother
★★ Borrow from a friend
★★★ Worth the money
★★★★ Wonderful
★★★★★ Instant classic

Susan Sarandon (left) and Geena Davis take aim in Thelma and Louise.

THE CINÉ FILES

Al Kratina has his own take on new DVDs every Tuesday on our movie blog. montrealgazette.com/cinefiles

'I was a fool, really' – unlike a sheet, that about covers it

DOUG CAMILLI

Big hilarity in Britain because a woman named **Sally Bercow** posed, for the Evening Standard newspaper, wearing only a bedsheet, and not wearing it too thoroughly.

This raises eyebrows because she's not another topless Page 3 bimbo from a British tabloid, but rather, or, the wife of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Sally, 41, talks in the interview about the "aphrodisiac" nature of life in the Speaker's residence, right in the Palace of Westminster.

The pic is quite decorous, really, altogether safe for work, and she looks pretty good.

But Sally wouldn't do it again, apparently. She says she thought it was "a bit of harmless fun," but now sees that "I was a fool, really, to agree to be photographed in a sheet. ... I look like a complete idiot. ... My husband's not exactly thrilled about it, but he's pretty cool, really."

The other day I told you about **Ziggy Marley**, Bob's son, adding a child to his family. Now there's news about **Cedella Marley**, Ziggy's older sister, a fashion designer (who isn't?). She just landed the gig to create Jamaica's uniforms for the 2012 Olympics.

"It'll be **Grace Jones** meets my dad," she told WWD, "very music inspired and a bit retro. ... There will be elements of Dad's look about it ... those tracksuits he used to wear – I'll be bringing that, too. I'm sure he's smiling down right now."

Her label is called Catch a Fire, because, you know, if you can't cash in on your father, who can you cash in on? She's 43.

English actress **Emily Blunt** has been working steadily since The Devil Wears Prada (2006), but you don't hear her name much during awards season, do you?

Doesn't bother her. Those grapes are probably sour, anyway:

"I don't have that 'I really want to win' sort of thing. Am I disappointed if I lose? No. Absolutely not."

Uhhh, sweetie? Actually, you haven't even been nominated for much.

But that's okay with her too, because, you know, who cares? "The awards thing is tricky to understand because it's about momentum. ... It's subjective – not everyone likes some of the Oscar-winning performances. ... Even if you were to win, there would be people who'd hate the fact you'd won it."

Spotlight couple: Zac Efron, having broken up with **Vanessa Hudgens**, is turning up all over L.A. with blond Aussie **Teresa Palmer**. Doing some serious public smoochery, too, to the point where, I gather, passers-by were muttering "get a room!"

Teresa has a movie coming out, Take Me Home Tonight, and maybe the studio is renting Zac by the hour to drum up publicity for her because, let's face it, curvy blond starlets are not exactly rare in Tinseltown. To make herself stand out from the herd, a girl needs to, you know, date Zac Efron or at least look like she's dating Zac Efron.

Zac is 22. Teresa is 24.

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RODRIGUEZ Continuity is the key

CONTINUED FROM C1

Richard Meltzer (right) – with John Lydon (left) and Keith Levene of Public Image Ltd. in 1979 – bills himself as the "inventor" of rock criticism. His 1970 book The Aesthetics of Rock was one of the first major studies of the music.

FROM GAZETTE FILES

Back then, the new rock critics waxed long and hard (and wild) on the latest releases. Quite often, the reviews were more interesting than the records. Their rhapsodies, collected in the original Rolling Stone Record Review (published in 1971, with a sequel in 1974, covering the paper's beginnings), are in sharp contrast to today's pouty, industry-jargon filled reviews in the Stone and Spin. These books and critiques are well worth hunting down on eBay and Google.

Today, in the absence of truly great mainstream American music magazines, I depend largely on British publications – such glossy monthlies as Mojo, Uncut and Q – to dig deeper into the sounds of today and yesteryear. These titles are brilliant at connecting historical articles with features on the latest acts. Continuity is the key.

The table was set for these magazines by weekly tabloids like Melody Maker and New Musical Express (NME is still going strong, especially its website), which combined fan enthusiasm with trade news. Sample headline from a 1963 Melody Maker: "ROLLING BEATLES BLAST COPY CATS – Even our hair styles are aped." (Holy cow!) If these papers drove Beatlemania back then, they also had much to do with promoting more recent Britpop.

Mojo, Uncut and Q publish lovingly conceived "collector's editions" that can be considered books indispensable to any music fan's library, filled with rare photos, pertinent essays and album surveys on the greats. Case in point: Mojo's recent celebration of the 70th birthday anniversary of Frank Zappa, who died in 1993, is something an American outfit would never publish (especially with the cover headline "Rock's greatest visionary").

Coverage isn't limited to major stars. Mojo's 200th edition, from last May, was guest-edited by Tom Waits, constituting a welcome illumination of one of rock's most idiosyncratic singer-songwriters. Last year the magazine presented a survey on the 40th anniversary of the great Elektra label, featuring rundowns of 40 of its greatest albums by the likes of the Stooges, MC5, Tim Buckley, Nico and, of course, the Doors (who merited a long piece on the making of their spectacular debut album).

The Mojo Collection – a year-by-year survey of notable albums (including compilations), now in its fourth edition and filled with details, quotes and trivia on their creation – has no equivalent in America.

These magazines are also obsessed with lists that are well informed or, at least, worth arguing over. To wit: A Mojo blue-chip panel (from Björk to Brian Wilson) came up with 100 Records That Changed the World. The Top 10 are:

1. Tutti Frutti by Little Richard
2. I Want to Hold Your Hand by the Beatles
3. Heartbreak Hotel by Elvis Presley
4. The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan
5. Autobahn by Kraftwerk
6. King of the Delta Blues Singers by Robert Johnson
7. The Velvet Underground & Nico
8. Anthology of American Folk Music (compiled by Alan Lomax)
9. What'd I Say by Ray Charles
10. God Save the Queen by Sex Pistols

Good reading galore; arguments ensue.

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